Narrative review

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Online dating research: a narrative review

Abstract

In this narrative review on online dating, summaries are given of current publications on prevalence and demographic factors, online profiles, positive effects of online dating, negative effects/risk factors and methodological limitations of this literature. The prevalence in the U.S. has ranged from 20-40% of adults with 30-50-year-old adults being most active and males being more frequent users. Dating profiles suggest that originality, self-disclosure and dissimilar personalities have been preferred. The positive effects have included ease of communication, self-disclosure, expanding social networks and enhancing marital success. The negative effects have far exceeded the positive effects. They include sexual anxiety symptoms, personalities hidden behind persona, rejection, ghosting, hostility, scamming, controlling behavior, cyber-harassment and cyberstalking, sexual harassment, cyber-dating abuse, mental and sexual health issues and suicidality. Methodological limitations include sampling primarily young affluent adults and primarily focusing on negative effects/risk factors of online dating. Given the severity of the negative effects, it's surprising that no intervention/therapy studies appeared in this literature.

Tiffany Field
University of Miami/Miller School of Medicine and Fielding Graduate University, USA

Correspondence: Tiffany Field, PhD, University of Miami/Miller School of Medicine and Fielding Graduate University, USA, Tel 305-975-5029

Introduction

Online dating research: a narrative review

Online dating has been defined as the practice of searching for a romantic or sexual partner on the internet, typically via a dedicated website or app. Other important reasons for online connections include seeking companionship and opportunities for self-disclosure. This narrative review of the current literature on online dating research involved entering the search terms online dating into PubMed and PsycINFO. Exclusion criteria for this review included proposed protocols, pilot studies and non-English language papers. Surprisingly, only 34 papers met criteria for this review. They can be divided into categories including prevalence and demographic factors (8 papers), online profiles (2 papers) positive effects (4 papers), negative effects/risk factors (18 papers) and methodological limitations of this literature (2 papers).

Prevalence and demographic factors

Online dating has become increasingly popular and has reputedly displaced other ways of meeting dating partners starting around 2013 (Table 1).[1] Twelve years later, the **prevalence** has been estimated at 320 million users worldwide and 20 to 40% of adults in the U.S. meeting their romantic partners online.[2] This prevalence range may represent older adults at 20% and younger adults at 40%. The high prevalence for youth is not surprising as young adults have been increasingly spending their free time online.

Table 1 Prevalence and demographic factors on online dating (and first authors)

Prevalence	First authors
320 million users worldwide	Tadros
20-40% adults in the U.S.	Tadros
Demographic Factors	
Gender differences- males more frequent users	Jimenez-Munro
Age differences-30-50-year-old adults most active	Jimenez-Munro
Gender and age-young women >interested in communication	Menkin
-older women have less access	Hall

Demographic differences have been reported for online dating. These include gender differences and age differences. **Gender differences** have been noted for dating app users in a sample of middle-aged men and women (N= 298, 25–50-years-old).[3] The males more frequently used dating apps for longer periods of time and for a greater amount of time per day. These gender differences are difficult to interpret, but they may be a continuation online of the offline tradition of men initiating dating relationships.

In an eye tracking study on 18-to-27-year-old males and females, the females, surprisingly, evaluated men's faces more positively when income and occupation were low, regardless of attractiveness.[4] In contrast, the males increased their attention to unattractive women who had a high-level income and occupation. The men were also more interested in short-term online dating and the women in long-term relationships. These gender differences are also difficult to interpret and it's not clear how income and occupation could be known by looking at faces in an eye tracking study.

Age differences in online dating have also been reported. In a study from Holland (N= 367 single users, 18-to-60-years-old) the 30-to-50-year-old group were the most active.[5] The use of online dating sites was, surprisingly, unrelated to income and education. Those who were low in dating anxiety were more active on dating sites. Those who are low in dating anxiety would be expected to be more active both on and off dating sites and those with social anxiety would likely be more active online versus offline.

Both **gender and age differences** have been reported in at least one study. In that study entitled "Online dating across the lifespan", data were taken from the dating site eHarmony (N= 5434).[6] The users valued interpersonal communication more than sex appeal. Older individuals were less interested in sexual attraction. Women were more interested in communication versus sexual attraction and young women were more interested in communication than young men. That users generally valued interpersonal communication more than sex appeal is not surprising as it is a more socially desirable value and the users may have been "faking good" in stating a socially desirable preference.

Not surprisingly, older females had the least access to both economic and mating opportunities in a study on online daters (N=

1072).[7] That finding likely relates to older men seeking younger women traditionally in offline dating. In a similar study on an analysis of the Pew Research Center data (N= 4712), gay men and bisexual women reported more online abuse.[8] Bisexual and heterosexual women reported more offline abuse (being touched in an uncomfortable way). Gay men, bisexual men and women had more contact information or sexual images that were shown online non-consensually which may have contributed to their experiencing more online and offline abuse.

Online dating profiles

With respect to **online dating profiles**, originality was highly valued by at least one sample (Table 2).[9] **Originality** (e.g. metaphors) and **self-disclosure** statements explained almost half the variance in the dating profile texts. Metaphors generally refer to something abstract which would engage a person's interest and self-disclosure has been reportedly one of the motivating factors for online dating.[10]

Table 2 Online dating profile factors (and first authors)

Profile factors	First authors
Originality and self-disclosure preferred	Van der Zandenden
Dissimilar personalities preferred	Fox

In another study the participants coded the language of online dating texts, and they also completed the 10-item Personality Inventory.[11] The authors expected to find homophily (attraction to similar individuals). The participants correctly identified extroversion by the language of the texts. Surprisingly, they noted a general preference for **dissimilar personalities** on openness and conscientiousness, contrary to the authors' expectation that similar individuals would be attracted to each other. The unexpected preference for dissimilar personalities would be consistent with the age-old expression that "opposites attract".

Positive effects of online dating

Only a few positive effects of online dating have been reported in this current literature, although they would seemingly be important effects (Table 3). They include ease of communication, self-disclosure as already mentioned, expanding social networks and enhancing marital success.

Table 3 Positive effects of online dating (and first authors)

Effects	First authors
Ease of communication	Heliyon
Self-disclosure	Blackhart
Expanding social networks	Vandeweed
Enhancing marital success	Hu

In a study on adults from India, motives for being online were explored.[12,13] These included **ease of communication** but also love, socialization, distraction, trendiness and sexual experience, especially socialization and love. Females were more motivated by the ease of communication and males by the sexual experience motive. Age was correlated with love, distraction, trendiness and sex. Love, socialization and trendiness were positively correlated with frequency of online use and offline dating behavior. The greater ease of communication for females and sexual experience for men are consistent with other data already described.[6] The other variables including love, socialization, distraction and trendiness were unique to this study in this current literature on online dating.

Self-disclosure was another motivating variable for engaging in online dating. In one study, "rejection sensitivity" individuals were online more than non-rejection sensitivity individuals because they could engage in self-disclosure.[10] That was suggested to be a primary motivating factor for engaging in online dating. Self-disclosure might be less embarrassing online as the partner's reaction is not apparent at least in a facial expression. Surprisingly, self-disclosure offline, online and on zoom have not been compared, but self-disclosure would likely increase across those three media.

Expanding social networks was also given as a motivating variable for engaging in online dating. In a study entitled "Positives and negatives about online dating according to women 50 plus", the positives included expanding social networks for friendships and romantic partners, an ability to control dating risks, pacing the relationship formation and knowing more about the partner.[14] The negatives were pervasive lying, attempted financial exploitation in the form of scammers and unwanted electronic sexual aggression. These positive and negative effects were all predictable and likely the reason for their selection by the authors of this study. The increasingly popular qualitative interview studies will likely reveal more motivating variables for engaging in online dating.

Enhancing marital success is still another motivating variable for engaging in online dating. In a study entitled "Does online dating make relationships more successful?" the Pew Research center data was used to address this question (N=2,787).[15] The answer was yes for marital relationship success but no for non-marital relationship success. The married individuals versus the non-married individuals were possibly thinking about their relationship history and related it back to their online dating.

Negative effects/risk factors for online dating

The numbers of negative effects /risk factors for online dating have far exceeded the positive effects in this current literature (Table 4). The severity of the negative effects also outweighs the benefits of the positive effects. The negative effects include social anxiety, hidden personalities, rejection, ghosting, hostility, controlling behavior, scamming, cyber-harassment, cyber-stalking, cyber-dating abuse, depression and suicidality.

Table 4 Negative effects/risk factors for online dating (and first authors)

Effects	First authors
Social anxiety symptoms	Lenton-Brym
Personalities hidden behind persona	Jiara
Rejection	Van der Zanden, Sparks
Hostility	Andrighetto, Jaureguizar
Scamming	Schokkenbroek
Controlling behavior	Redondo
Cyber harassment and cyberstalking	Tompson
Sexual harassment	Gewirtz-Meydan
Cyberdating abuse	Weathers, Cakici
Mental and sexual health issues	Winter
Suicidality	Perrin

The Problematic Online Dating App Use Scale was developed as an assessment of online dating problems (N=284, mean age=26) that was used in several of the following studies.[16] The scale items include problematic social media use, cyberpornography use, love addiction, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness. It's not clear why this scale was called problematic use as at least the last 3 items (i.e. agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness) would not be considered problems.

In a study on **social anxiety symptoms** and match rates following dating app use, participants were randomly assigned to a high or a low match rate group (N=128).[17] Not surprisingly, negative affect

following the dating app use was predicted by both social anxiety symptoms and a low match rate.

When profiles were judged for accuracy of presentation, the profiles were seen accurately, but the **personalities were hidden behind the persona** (public image or mask).[18] In this study profiles were submitted (N=180) and judges were told how the participants wanted to be seen. The profiles were judged accurately, but as the authors said, "personality did not leak through persona".

Rejection is a risk factor in online dating that has many forms. In a study entitled "Multiple facets of rejections in online dating: exploring types, reasons and impact" (N=177), **ghosting** (suddenly disappearing without warning) was the most frequent form of rejection.[19] Unmatching/blocking and rejections with explanation were more painful forms. The reasons given for rejection in this sample were lack of attraction and lack of relationship investment. These offensive reasons for rejections were understandably painful.

Rejection was extreme for a group of young males who felt frustration and despair at being repeatedly neglected on the dating market.[20] A comparison between a group of "incel males" (involuntary celibates) (N= 38) and non-incel males (N= 107) suggested that the incel males experienced more depression, rejection sensitivity, relationship status influence and insecure attachment. They were also less popular and engaged in more liberal dating app strategies, and they had fewer matches, conversations and in-person dating outcomes.

Frequently they expressed misogynist views (denigrating women). It's not clear whether they were rejected before or after their hostile behavior as this was not a longitudinal study.

Rejection was a significant risk factor for increased **hostility** in another online dating study. In that study entitled "Lonely hearts and angry minds: online dating rejection increases male (but not female) hostility", the results are in the title.[21] Rejection in this sample led to anger which, in turn, led to male hostility. This gender difference was not surprising given that psychology research has often indicated that men are more physically aggressive and hostile than women. Women more frequently use indirect or relational aggression.

Hostility has been a problem in both online and offline dating, for example, in a study on university students (N=341).[22] In this sample, online and offline dating violence were correlated. The reciprocity of violence was greater for offline dating, but both types of victims had greater hostility and psychological symptoms. The reciprocity of violence in this sample may relate to its being a more recent study on younger adults than the previously described study reporting hostility only in males.

Scamming has been one of the most common risks of online dating and has been considered expensive and fraudulent. In a systematic review of 50 studies entitled "Love as bait: A scoping review and crime script analysis of online romance scams", the process of scamming is summarized by nine major scenes:

1) preparation (the setup); 2) target selection (the hunt); 3) initial contact (the hook); 4) transition to private communication (the shift); 5) grooming 6) the sting; 7) financial transaction (the payout); 8) the squeeze (sextortion) and 9) the aftermath (revictimization).[23] Hundreds of women in the U.S. have been scammed online. Reputedly they have paid out $30,000 on average and several prestigious money transfer and banking institutions have been involved in the transactions.

Cyberdating violence has included a range of behaviors from controlling behavior to cyber-harassment, to cyberstalking and cyberdating abuse. **Controlling behavior** can be considered a form of cyberdating violence, but it's not supposedly perceived that way in early adolescence. In a study on young adolescents (N= 466), controlling behavior was not recognized as cyberdating violence.[24] Unfortunately, the adolescents normalized the controlling behavior such as insisting on always knowing the partners' whereabouts and sharing social media passwords.

Cyber harassment and cyberstalking behavior have been studied in New Zealand university students (N=185).[25] That behavior was common, but surveyed folks only reported associated fear and distress for 1/2 of these experiences. In another study on cyber harassment in students (N=1001, age range 18-25 years-old), jealousy was involved.[26] In a narrative review of 12 studies on dating app **sexual harassment**, the prevalence was as high as 57 to 89%.[27] Not surprisingly, women and minorities were at the greatest risk for sexual harassment.

Cyberdating abuse has been the focus of a few studies in the literature on online dating research. In one study college students' perceptions were assessed (N=320 females and 166 males 18-to-25-years-old).[28] For this study, digital dating abuse was defined as repeated digital media use to threaten, harass, pressure, monitor, control or coerce a dating partner. Females versus males rated digital dating abuse as more abusive likely because the males were rated as being more digitally abusive. As might be expected, those with a history of digital dating abuse rated it as less abusive. The greater digital dating abuse of women in this study is consistent with a systematic review on 23 papers on cyberdating abuse that concluded that females were more likely to face severe negative experiences.[29]

In a similar study on undergraduate students (N= 416), the Cyberdating Abuse Scale and the Fear of Intimacy Scale were administered.[30] The males were more involved than females in experiencing and perpetrating dating abuse and the females had greater fear of intimacy. Surprisingly, students in romantic and long-term relationships were more abusive in this sample.

Mental and sexual health issues have resulted from problematic online dating app use. In a sample of Swiss university students (N=923), the Problematic Online Dating Apps Use Scale was administered.[31] The data suggested that the students who scored high on the problematic online dating scale experienced more depression, impulsivity, sex partners and sexually transmitted disease.

Suicidality was the most severe mental health issue following cyberdating abuse. In a study entitled "Dating violence victimization, perpetration and suicidality among adolescents", dating violence victimization had greater odds for females.[32] As many as one-third of the students (N=610 15-17-years-old) reported suicidality. As might be expected, trans and gender diverse adolescents reported greater suicidality.

Methodological limitations of this literature

A couple researchers have referred to methodological limitations within their own research. For example, in a study entitled "The overlooked and the overstudied", qualitative research was conducted (N= 125).[33] The methodological limitations they discussed about their research included that it focused on a sample of young, well-educated, ethnic majority and primarily heterosexual females and men seeking men in western societies. That sample is very representative of most of the samples in this literature. The authors also referred to the research being centered on problem–oriented topics including risks and emotional aspects of online dating, negative technological

communication skills, etc. This has been very negative research in terms of being centered on problems/negative effects/risk factors related to online dating. As prevalent as online dating has become (20-40% in U.S. adults), surprisingly only a few positive effects were reported for online dating. The studies on negative effects far exceeded those on positive effects.

In a systematic review entitled "Problematic online dating", the conclusion of the researchers based on 29 papers they reviewed suggested several methodological limitations.[34] Their primary concern was the lack of a single agreed upon definition of problematic online dating. They also referred to sample sizes as varying between 64 and 4057 and ages of participants ranging between 13 and 60 years-old with many being between 18 and 35 years-old. The online dating use was motivated by several different factors, with a focus on problematic use including compulsive use and an imbalance between off-line and online frequency. Adverse correlates were typically found including mood, anxieties, media variables, undesired behaviors, personality problems, self-attitudes, partner choice and sexuality.

Despite the frequency and severity of the negative effects of online dating reported in this current literature, no research has focused on intervention/therapy for those negative effects. Despite this problem and the other methodological limitations of this literature, the research reviewed here can help inform future research on prevention and intervention for the negative effects of online dating.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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